IT'S NOT ALL GAMES

by Jami Schwarzwalder

ABSTRACT:

Students, K-12 to college, live in an information rich environment online, in games, and at school. How can libraries mimic these environments to instruct students how to find quality information? What strategies can we employ to reach this Millennial Generation?

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, over 10.5 billion dollars were spent on video games, a growth of six percent from 2004 (Maragos, 2006). This figure does not include video game consoles, board games, or free online games. Gaming is everywhere. According to a 2003 survey by Pew Internet and American Life project, all of the 1,162 college students from twenty-seven campuses surveyed, had played at least one video game in their lifetime (Jones, 2003). This is statistically unheard of. The average age of a gamer is thirty-three (ESA, 2006). These figures will only increase.

TYPES OF GAMES

There are three types of gaming: console, computer, and tabletop. Each is unique, and important to the players that participate in the games. Console games, or video games, started with Atari and Nintendo in the early 1980s. When laws were being passed to limit the number of teens allowed to congregate in one area, companies began developing an arcade game that could be played at home.

Console games store game information on memory cards, so libraries that collect these games do not have to worry about CD Keys.

As of 2006, there are three major companies competing for the title of most popular video game console: *Nintendo*, *Microsoft*, and *Sony*. Nintendo, most known for its innovation and family friendly games, will release the *Wii* this fall. The *Playstation 3* will also be released later this year, made by Sony, it will replace the Playstation 2. Lastly, Microsoft's next generation console is already available. In November 2005, the *Xbox 360* was released. Both Sony and Microsoft are focusing on realistic graphics for their next generation consoles. Nintendo and Sony are also competing in the hand held market with the *DS* and *PSP*.

Computer games come in many different forms. Some games are played directly on the computer by installing software from a CD or download, like *Civilization IV* (Firaxis, 2005). Others are hosted online using Flash or software. Currently the most popular are *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games* (MMORPGs), such as *Everquest*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Runescape*. All of these games are accessible through the computer and constantly evolving as immersive 3-D worlds. The University of Wisconsin-Madison and MIT are currently researching the educational benefits of these games.

Tabletop gaming has the same complexity as video and computer games and uses the same types of strategy. Utilizing physical components such as dice, cards, miniature figures, boards, paper money and maps, and simple wooden, cardboard and plastic pieces, these games have players working against or with each other to meet a goal. Modern strategy games originated in Germany and are gaining popularity with the American gamer.

PLAYERS

The average video game player is thirty-three years old. S/he began playing as a teen in arcades, and still owns gaming systems. The average "gamer" is an average person. With the large variety of games, from sports to role-playing to traditional, there is a game for everyone, and focusing on one type will not begin to accurately portray the other games. Each player is unique and attracted to different games for a wide variety of reasons.

Some role-players might enjoy the story of a game and the ability to control their character through experience - this is true of all RPGs and is not limited to paper, computer, or console gamers. Other gamers enjoy the strategy of a game, and will be attracted the ability to build something. Still others might focus on the complex tactics involved in outthinking the game or

a human opponent. Sports games follow the same rules and physics as real life, allowing players to be involved in the various decisions involved in playing the different sports. Retro gamers are attracted to games that don't have much complexity, and will prefer re-released arcade games, and the original cartridge games.

Many games have multiplayer options; some require the Internet to connect to other gamers worldwide, while others allow you to play together in the same place. Multiplayer games have a competitive aspect to them, which makes playing with friends more fun than playing alone. There are cooperative games, competitive games, and games with both elements, in all genres.

GAMING IN YOUR LIBRARY

Meeting the needs of gamers begins by respecting their choice of hobby. Like knitting, golfing, gardening, or reading, gaming is an activity; the only difference is that it is a more recent activity, thus has an audience primarily under the age of forty. Senior gamers are increasing in number; one in four gamers is over the age of fifty! (ESA, 006)

Two non-technical ways to show respect are allowing gamers to have the freedom to use the library's resources to learn more about this hobby and collecting nonfiction related to this topic.

Like the other hobbies supported in your community, you can offer related programming. A popular choice currently is *Dance Dance Revolution* (Konami, 2005), a game played at home and in arcades, where players use a mat and their feet to dance in time with images on the screen. This program requires a projector, a console, a game disc, and two high quality mats which can cost anywhere from $300 to $2,000.

A weekly collectable card game night or a role playing session is another program option. These games require one table per game for the players to be able to play. Not all families or game stores have the space required for the components.

For libraries focused on collecting primarily popular material, console games make an excellent addition to the collection. As of January 2006, there are at least seven libraries that collect console games, including Indiana State University, which has a collection in their browsing collection for undergraduates to check out. Libraries that circulate games process them very similarly to CDs and DVDs. For more information, including contact information, visit http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Gaming.

ONLINE

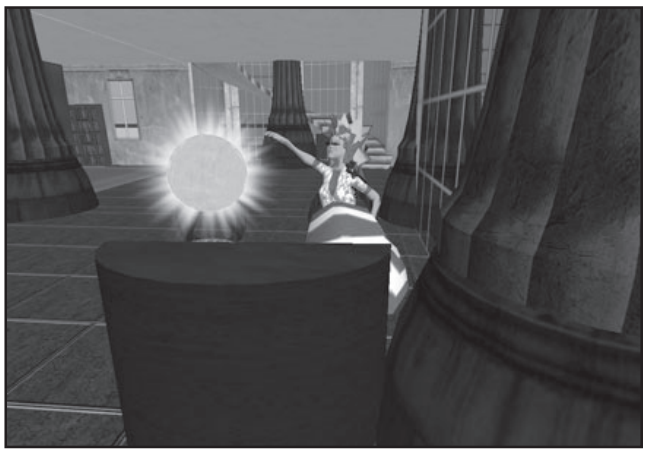
In the past ten years, a larger variety of games have been able to be successful because of the Internet. Online websites, forums, and instant messaging have made it possible to connect with gamers across the world. This means that most gamers, even the ones that don't play console or computer games, know how to use the Internet. Virtual bulletin boards were the first social software that archived the conversations. The Internet belonged to anyone who knew how to use it, and as time progressed, people who understood the technology created better ways of communicating. Being online every day makes the changes appear slow and gradual, as new ideas feed off older ones.

The Internet today has a broad range of interactive communication options that continue to expand. Libraries need to become familiar with the Internet's increasingly interactive capabilities and immerse themselves in online worlds. Librarians not familiar with blogging, should take some time to read some blogs related to their personal interests. Blogging is online journaling that is written with the intention of others reading the posts. This concept evolved into podcasting, which is an easy-to-use audio recording system that anyone can learn quickly. Recently, *YouTube* has led the way in allowing vidcasting, where anyone can upload videos to share, with no special equipment or registration required. Vidcasters use recorded webcam or camcorder footage or captured video from their favorite game. Then they edit the raw video, adding the desired sound to create *machinima*, and *vidcasts*. A free account at *YouTube* allows for ten minutes of footage not exceeding 100MB to be uploaded, keeping files short in length and small in size.

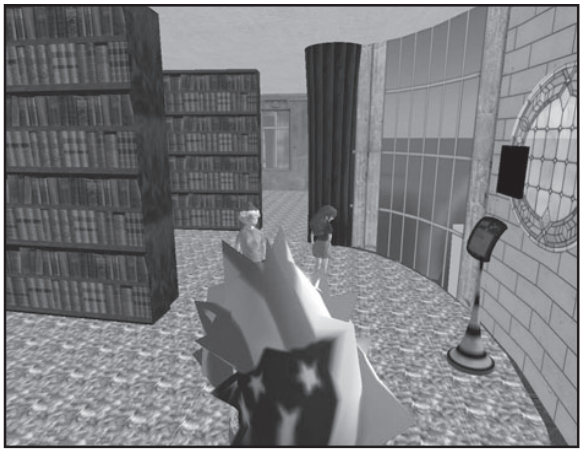
SOCIAL

Whether in a game or on a forum gamers have a large community online. Tabletop gamers can find various fan sites that have advice about playing/purchasing the game, reviews, and even web versions. MMORPGs have an inherent community through guilds, alliances, federations, and other team groups. Since these games are played with other people, part of the challenge is interacting with others while playing the game.

One online environment much like the world in MMORPG's, is *Second Life*. Here the citizens create the world using basic objects (*prims*), and computer scripting (*LSL*). The game has a thriving economy, allowing people to buy and sell within the game. The creators, Lindens, have built into the software a currency converter, transforming game currency to real dollars, and real dollars to game currency. The Alliance Library System is currently exploring the opportunities available to libraries in these future environments. Many educators and researchers are using this environment to be able to study experiences not easily reproducible in real life. (Kemp, 2006)



Author and Curious Witte at the Second Life Library Reference Desk



Author helping two patrons in the stacks of the Second Life Library

DIGITAL

Marc Prensky calls the millennial generation, *digital natives* (Prensky, 2006), meaning that technology is a natural part of their world. From preschool on, children sit at the computer and play games. Through games, they learn how the keyboard works and how to use the mouse, becoming comfortable with the computer in addition to enhancing math and literacy skills. When children enter elementary school, computers are used to type assignments, play more games, and sometimes search the web. Students have at least seven years of experience with a computer before middle school, when schools start to instruct students on how to use the Internet for research. INCOLSA's *INSPIRE* collection of databases has created a great resource for students to use, but in order for them to become effective users, they need to be taught at an early age the difference between a database and a website obtained from Google.

A sixteen-year-old today was born in 1990. In elementary school they had *Oregon Trail*, *Carmen Sandiego* (Broderbund Software, 1985), *Incredible Machine* (Sierra Entertainment, 1993), *Mario is Missing* (The Software Toolworks, 1993), *Civilization II* (Microprose, 1996), *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1996), *Ultima Online* (Origin Systems, 1997), *Pokèmon* (Game Freak, 1996), *Roller Coaster Tycoon* (Hasbro, 1999), *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000), and *Sonic Adventure 2* (Sonic Team, 2001). As a child, Nintendo was popular, and as a teen Playstation was the biggest console. In kindergarten the Internet became mainstream.

These are what teens consider technology. Librarians and other educators need to not only have technology, but use it as a tool to convey information. We have to be wise about what formats we use, and be aware that no matter what we know about technology, teens will know more. If we are to be heeded, we must be willing to listen to what they have to say, and then give them suggestions for improving their searching.

ONLINE PRESENCE

One of the first things teens will see is your website. They will judge your library based on what they see. If you look at some of the most popular sites (*MySpace*, *MTV*, *YouTube*), you will see they are full of information for teens, but also allow teens to contribute. Much of the web content created isn't created by companies, but rather individuals. Like Microsoft and Apple, Google was created by college students (Vise, 2005). Today's teens, who are already familiar with using the Internet as consumers, are turning into producers, and the best thing libraries can do is feed them information to fuel their creativity (Lenhart, 2005).

TRUST - BUILDING

The teens of the millennial generation are producers. In their free time, most will eventually make creative products using the world that is natural to them. Creativity takes an investment of time, and an immersion into similar content. The best ideas develop as a solution to a problem. In the online world everyone is treated as an equal, and one person's idea can be shared, so that ideas become reality. As librarians we need to appreciate the teen's culture, and allow them to spend their free time in appropriate activities of their choice.

Using teen volunteers for meaningful participation is just one way to build and instill trust. If you have teens in your library who want something to do, you could allow them to create promotional materials for you. Support the teens creativity by giving them room to create instructional manuals for the libraries online catalog and databases. Millennials are more productive when given a project to complete, rather than specific tasks (Beck, 2004)

Teens are used to being in control, and being authorities on the computer at home. If they know more about the Internet than you, why would they want to listen to you talk about Internet safety? Even if that is one aspect you know more about than them, you cannot dictate to them but you can involve them. One of the elements of teen culture is socializing with friends; creating an Internet Safety and Ethics Program as part of a Technology club would allow teens to teach their peers about this topic.

EDUCATION

Games are about solving problems. Current gamer researchers all agree critical thinking, problem-solving, and risk-taking are key elements in games. Libraries do not have the budget to create visual environments similar to *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) or *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003), but we can use real problems to show students how to use our library. Let the students take structured risks, and experiment with the different resources. Expose them to different resources the library has to offer, when it meets their needs. Learning how to find an article when they need one will be more useful than instruction taught out of context. Utilizing Dr. Sylvia Chard's Project Approach (Chard, 1998) libraries can create meaningful instruction.

Jeremy McCall, a history teacher from Cincinnati, has used games in his classroom to help teach students critical thinking skills, analyzing the historical accuracy of the game *Civilization III* and *Rome Total War*. His lessons can be used in a library setting as well. This education focuses on the reflection of actions, after being provided accurate facts. Instructing students on proper search strategies, then analyzing different simulated search strategies may not be enough. Making a game out of the different simulations, where the students were involved in the process would be one option, but this may lead to open criticisms. One option I think would be the most beneficial is to allow teens to create their own simulations for instruction. Have a contest to select the ones that will be used that school year for all students who need assistance using the technology.

ACTION

With the constant evolution of the online world, it can be an intimidating place for librarians. The average cycle of a technology is a matter of months. What was popular this past summer will almost surely be obsolete for next year's summer reading program. In order to appeal to the millennial generation, we have to know how to support them. One of the most effective ways is to be a part of the online environment yourself. Pick a topic that interests you, and explore how technology has enhanced it. Spend time on the Internet using it as a tool to help you find information and communicate with others. Once librarians play an active part in the various communities, we will be one of the producers as well, and can create content to fix the problems. The library has valuable information that is beneficial to everyone, but we can't always wait for everyone to come into the library looking for it. Marketing is about making people aware of your product, and as a library we need to make sure we advertise more than just our shelves of books.

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GAME SITES AND OTHER WEB-SITES MENTIONED IN THIS ARTICLE

Alliance Library System
http://www.alliancelibrarysystem.com/

Everquest http://everquest2.station.sony.com/

Runescape http://www.runescape.com/

Second Life http://secondlife.com/

World of Warcraft http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/index.xml & http://www.worldofwconline.com/

YouTube http://www.youtube.com

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Jami Schwarzwalder (jlschwa@iupui.edu) is a recent graduate of Indiana University in Indianapolis. She has played video games for 12 years, and participated in online communities for 6 years. Currently she is an active member and blogger for YALSA, advocate for gamers and libraries with Beth Gallaway at Libgaming, and library volunteer at the Second Life Library 2.0. More information about her current projects can be found at http://www.mbmpl.org/site.html.